



**University  
Hospitals Sussex**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Rib injury

Accident and emergency

Patient information

## Management of rib injuries

Rib injuries are painful and can hurt for 3 to 6 weeks. The pain will gradually get better with time.

If you come to the Emergency Department with a rib injury, we will not do an X-ray unless we think your lung might be damaged. The doctor will check you carefully to decide this. We do not routinely X-ray rib fractures because it would not change how we treat your injury.

### Important things to look out for

If you develop shortness of breath OR you start coughing up blood please return to the Emergency Department.

If you start to cough up green phlegm and become feverish please see your GP as you may have developed a chest infection.

## What can I do to help the healing process?

Take pain relief as prescribed by your healthcare provider. This will help you move comfortably and take deep breaths, which prevents chest infections.

When doing breathing exercises or coughing, you can support the injured area by holding a folded towel or small blanket against it.

- Do not avoid coughing, as it helps keep your lungs clear.
- For the first few days after injury, you can use ice to reduce pain and swelling.

- Always wrap ice in a tea towel to protect your skin.
- Apply ice for 10–15 minutes at a time, up to 5 times daily.
- If you have diabetes, poor circulation, or numbness in the area, check with your healthcare provider before using ice.

## Heat

4 days after the initial injury you can start to use heat around the area. Heat can be applied using a wheat pack or a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel. If the injured area remains warm or hot it is better to continue using ice.

## Gentle movement

Is it very important that you keep the area moving from the day of the injury otherwise it will stiffen up and delay your recovery. In the first few days you should move the arm and back with slow controlled movements, within comfortable range. After 4 to 6 days you can start to gently stretch further, producing a mild discomfort at the end of the movement.

## Exercises

Please do these exercises daily.

### 1. Supported cough or sneeze.

Sitting or standing, if you need to cough or sneeze, place one hand over painful area, and fold your other forearm over the top and press gently whilst you cough or sneeze to support the area. You should try not to suppress a cough as this may increase the risk of getting chest infection.

## 2. Stretching

- Sit straight with your legs comfortably apart and your chin tucked in.
- Raise both arms and clasp your hands behind your head.
- Push your elbows back as much as you can and expand the chest as much as you are able, gradually stretch a little more as your pain allows.
- Maintain the position and relax.



Sets: 1

Repetition: 10

Frequency: 3 times a day.

Person stretching

## 3. Deep breathing: 1

- Lay on your side on a bed with the painful side uppermost and top arm resting overhead.
- Place the hand of the lower arm on your ribs. Take a slow and deep inspiration whilst trying to raise the ribs outward / upward toward the hand resting on the ribs. Avoid pushing out with the abdominal muscles.



Person in the deep breathing position

#### 4. Deep breathing: 2

- Sit in a chair or lie on your back with your knees bent and your back in neutral position (slightly arched).
- Place your hands on your stomach and concentrate on your breathing.
- Breathe in as deeply as you can feeling your abdomen rising more than your chest, and exhale without forcing.
- Pause shortly after each exhale before the next inhale. Take three or four deep breaths at a time or you may become dizzy.

**Sets:** 1

**Repetition:** 3 to 4

**Frequency:** 3 times a day.



Person in the deep breathing position

#### 5. Side bending

- Sit up straight in a chair and look directly ahead of you.
- Lift arm up and above your head and slowly bend sideways as far as you can tolerate AWAY FROM THE PAINFUL SIDE while reaching down with the opposite hand, until you feel a stretch at the side of your trunk. Relax.

**NOTE:** When you bend your trunk sideways, do not twist or lean forward. Keep your body straight and facing forward.



Person side bending

## 6. Twisting

- Sit tall.
- Lock hands together at chest height.
- Turn to each side, gradually increasing the range of movement as your pain allows.
- Slowly return to neutral position.
- In time you will be able to pull yourself further round by gripping the back of the chair with your hands.



Person twisting



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& Hove or Haywards Heath.

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